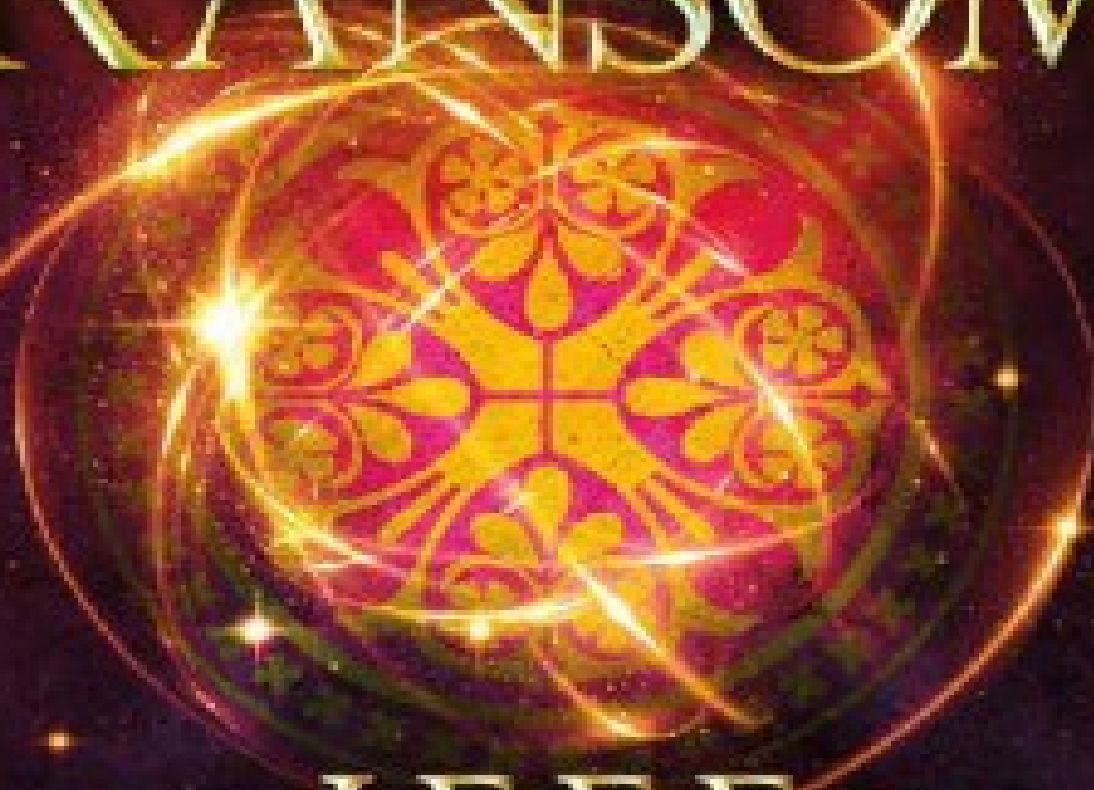


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THE FIRST ARGENTINES

KNIGHT'S RANSOM



JEFF
WHEELER

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KNIGHT'S RANSOM

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KNIGHT'S RANSOM

JEFF
WHEELER

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Published by 47North, Seattle

www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542025294

ISBN-10: 154202529X

Cover design by Shasti O'Leary Soudant

*In Memory of
Daron Septimus Wells*

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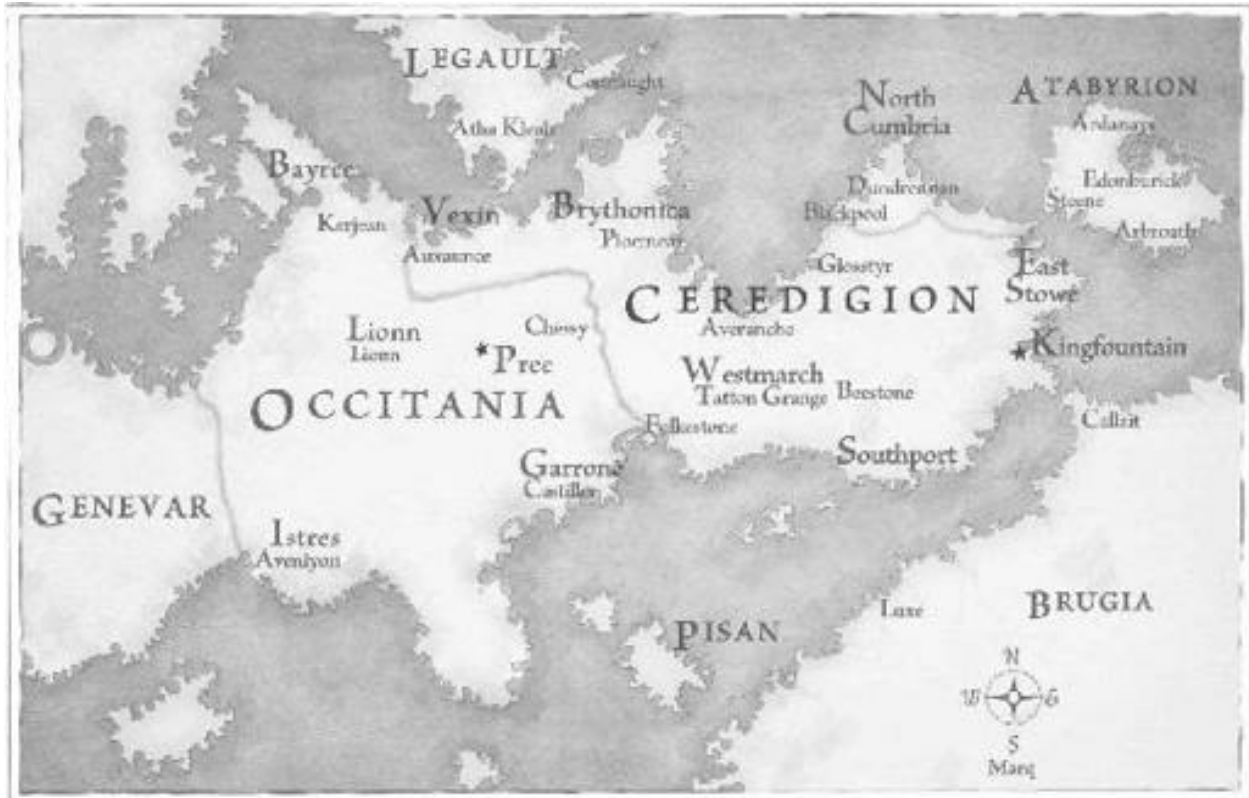
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Documenting the history of Ceredigion has far exceeded the ten years I'd predicted it would take. I began with the reign of King Severn Argentine and have gone backward to document his brother Eredur's reign. Attempting to go back even further, I realized it would be nearly impossible to discover more than scant details about the reigns of the first Argentines. Due to unrelenting civil wars and conquests between neighboring kingdoms, I found very little information in the palace archives, and what I did find I thought to be inaccurate in the extreme. Because the first two Argentine kings bear the same given name, the elder was called Ursus and the younger Primus. I believed they were their names but have now been proven wrong.

This much I have been able to cobble together from the scraps of history left to us these many centuries later: After the destruction of Leoneyis due to a massive flood, Occitania began to impose itself as the dominant kingdom in our world, and a new dynasty was established that persists to this day—the house of Vertus. The first Argentine king, Devon Argentine, came onto the scene after his grandfather died without a male heir. Devon's mother, who claimed legitimacy to the throne through her father, was preempted from taking it by her nephew, one Gervase Hastings, who seized the Hollow Crown for himself. His rule was marked by bitter contention among his nobles, fueled by King Lewis the Wise of Occitania. The two relations clashed until the kingdom of Ceredigion nearly ceased to exist. But when King Gervase began to sicken, he finally agreed that Devon Argentine would take the throne and unite the realm.

Beyond these few words very little has been passed down. But in my research, I happened to visit the kingdom of Legault, where I discovered a most interesting document in the archives. It was a copy of the journal of a young woman who lived during these turbulent times, an heiress of Legault whom King Gervase held in Kingfountain to guarantee her father's loyalty. As I read it, I was immediately struck by how

the events from the past mirror so closely our own days.

—*Polidoro Urbino, Court Historian of Kingfountain
(during the reign of Andrew Argentine)*





I'm only eight years old, but I swear everyone here at the palace of Kingfountain is an eejit. I listen to the servants worrying all day long, not over rising loaves of that awful-tasting pumpernickel bread. No, they're worrying about how long King Gervase can hold on. Of course, they should be worried. He's a fool eejit too. Gah, I wish I were back in Legault. This land is about as backward as a tail-headed cow. But alas, I cannot go back. I'm held as ransom for my father's good faith. I miss my da, who's a good sort, even though he's a noble from this land. I love that he taught me to use a bow as well as a sword. None of the other girls here know the first thing about either. They simper and buff their nails with stones to make them prettier. They can't stand me or my hair. Or my tongue. I say what I feel. That's what a Gaultic girl does. There's a lad here, though, another hostage like me. Poor little runt. I've been here months longer than he has, so I had to show him everything. He's Lord Barton's younger son. His name is Marshall, but I call him Ransom because I think it annoys him. He kept staring at me hair when we first met, so I nearly clogged him in the head. But he's not an eejit. Not like the others. After I asked him why he kept bothering about me hair, he said it made him think of autumn leaves when they change color. The other girls laughed at him when he said it. I clogged them instead.

—*Claire de Murrow, Princess of Connaught*
(which is in Legault
... and living in Kingfountain, even though I don't want
to be here)



PROLOGUE

Murdering a Child

King Gervase set the goblet down but didn't release the stem. It was already past sunset, and he had a splitting headache, which even the wine had failed to quiet. He felt his left eye begin to twitch. He hated when it did that, especially when someone was looking at him. Particularly the way Lord Gilbert was looking at him, with a little bit of sympathy and a greater portion of contempt.

"What did you say?" Gervase asked, tightening his grip on the stem of the goblet.

"My lord, he said he won't relinquish the castle."

The pounding in Gervase's skull felt like a smith's anvil. The words were incomprehensible through all that noise. "Lord Barton won't?"

"Yes—Lord Barton. He's strengthening its defenses as we speak." Gilbert had a sheen of sweat on his brow, and his tunic was mud splattered. Clearly he'd just ridden all the way from the Heath and up the hill to the palace.

Gervase stared at him in disbelief. "He gave me his sworn oath that he would relinquish that castle. He had no right to build it, no royal permission, and it is close enough to pose a strategic risk to the royal castle at Beestone if he finishes it. Yet he has proceeded anyway, bold as you please, and the only reason I didn't raze it earlier was because of that nagging whelp and his army!"

"That's the one, for certain," Gilbert said, rocking back on his heels. "He's defied you *again*, my lord. His loyalty may shift like a weather vane, but he's betting on Devon Argentine winning this conflict. We can't let Argentine use that castle as a stronghold. Nor can we let open defiance from such an insignificant lord go unpunished." The middle-aged noble stepped forward and planted his palms on the dining table in Gervase's state room. "You can toss a coin in the fountain of Our Lady to pray Barton will come around, but I'd wager that coin he'll be supping with Argentine before the end of the month."

"B-but I have Barton's son," Gervase said, his voice suddenly strangled with emotion. "I have his little brat as a hostage."

The look in Gilbert's eyes was cold. "I know, my lord. Which leaves you with one choice: you must kill the cub to tame the bear. John Barton clearly doesn't believe you will execute his son. You must prove him wrong. If you

don't, you will lose every bit of leverage you have with the other hostages. You think Archer will still stand by you? He dotes on his daughter, but he's not afraid of you. None of them are. Because they don't think you have the spleen to do the hard thing. Prove them wrong, my lord. Or give that empty crown to Devon now and save us more needless bloodshed."

Gervase saw the palms on the table turn into quivering fists, saw the knuckles bleach white with the strain. Lord Gilbert had no soul left. This civil war had destroyed not only the morale of the men—it had destroyed the men themselves. No one was faithful. Everyone wanted to see him fall. He shut his eyes, unable to bear the accusing look coming from the other man, his distant cousin, who had lost sons of his own in the conflict.

"You have to," Gilbert said dispassionately.

The words echoed within the clanging noise of his brutal headache. Gervase Hastings, King of Ceredigion. He'd loved the sound of it twenty years ago. Now it was a curse. He should have let someone else claw after the prize. Even with his eyes closed, he felt his eyelid twitching still.

So be it. His enemies thought he was weak. He had to prove them wrong. The thought of that innocent boy's face came into his mind amidst the hammer strokes. When Gervase had brought the boy, Marshall, to Kingfountain, the child had held his hand as they walked the main corridor of the castle, something children did out of a natural instinct of trust. The memory of that touch plunged a knife of despair into his heart. A little groan almost came out, but he stifled it, knowing it would further unman him in Gilbert's eyes.

"Your Majesty," Gilbert said evenly, his voice like chunks of ice from Dundrennan, that distant stronghold Atabyrion still held. It should be part of Ceredigion, but he hadn't the strength to win it back. "What are your orders?"

Gervase opened his bloodshot eyes, lifting lids that felt swollen. A dull pain sizzled in his abdomen, and his heart clenched with dread. He glared at Gilbert. "What does Barton call that castle again, the Heath?"

"Aye, my lord."

"We leave at dawn for the Heath. Send the trebuchets tonight and my riders to protect them. When they get there, tell them to start building a gallows within sight of the walls. We'll hang the boy first. Then the sire."

He picked up his goblet of tepid wine and nearly choked trying to get his next sip down. Gervase knew he wouldn't sleep that night. He might never sleep again if he followed through with the plan.



A cheer went up from the men as King Gervase of Ceredigion rode up to the war camp encircling the cursed keep. It was nearly midnight, but he hadn't wanted to stop along the way. The Heath lay due west of Kingfountain, although not far enough west to be in the borderlands, where he'd fought so many battles—of will and of might—with both Occitania *and* his rival for the throne. He was saddle sore from the ride and grateful to see his people had already put up the royal pavilion for him. The banner of House Hastings hung limp from a pole in the central spoke of the tent. Limp, how fitting. Wherever Devon was camped that night, there was probably a little breeze to rustle *his* standard. Curse him.

The knights of Gervase's mesnie dismounted and began preparing for his arrival in the tent. Squires tended the horses. Gervase loved his mesnie, these men who had fought with him and for him for so many years. Yet the sight of some of the younger faces brought back painful memories of those who had died. How many from his original mesnie were left—five or six? His brain felt like bread pudding. He couldn't think straight. Although he mourned the loss of those who had come before, these knights were young and ambitious. They'd tied their hopes to him, for a lord owed his mesnie rewards for their faithful service. Some had defected to the Argentine brat, but those who had stayed were loyal. Tried and trusted. He cared for them as if they were his own sons.

After dismounting, he limped toward his tent, tugging off his gauntlets as he went. Of course he'd ridden to the Heath fully armored. Even though his men offered him protection, he couldn't risk an ambush or a Gaultic archer skulking in the woods with a longbow, just waiting for an opportunity. Gervase didn't have the manpower to rid the woods of bandits and thieves. Every boy age fifteen or more was fighting on one side or the other. He caught a glimpse of Marshall Barton as he approached his pavilion and quickly went inside.

Lord Gilbert was there, wearing a hauberk and gloves but no battle armor. As a couple of knights hastened to remove Gervase's armor, he grunted and looked to Gilbert. "Did Barton do anything when he saw the siege engines coming?"

Gilbert pursed his lips and shrugged. He folded his arms, looking at one of the burning lanterns. "His men saw us building the gallows today. It's right in front of the camp, my lord. He thinks you're bluffing. He's not sent a

single word.”

From the way he said it, it was clear Gilbert thought so too.

The buckles were undone one by one and the straps loosened, helping Gervase breathe properly again. He was getting too old for this nonsense, even though he was only in his fifties. The ache in his chest was worrisome.

“Thank you,” he said to the nearest knight, Sir William. “Get some food before coming back. I need to speak privately with Lord Gilbert.”

“Aye, my lord,” said Sir William and promptly obeyed.

Once the tent was clear except for the two of them, Gilbert gave him a studying look. “Have you lost your nerve, my lord?”

“I brought the child, didn’t I?”

“What if the mother starts wailing from the battlements? I wouldn’t put it past Barton to arrange for something like that.”

Gervase snorted. “I suppose he might. The blackguard.”

“He’s cunning. And he’s testing you. They’re all testing you.”

Gervase looked away, feeling his courage wilt. How could he do this thing? A child should not be held accountable for the sins of his father. And yet the bonds of family were the strongest inducement at his disposal. Money could be replaced. Lands could be conquered. But a son . . . a son couldn’t be raised from the dead. Only in the fables of the Fountain did things like that ever happen.

The pallet and blankets had been laid out, and Gervase was weary enough he thought he might actually fall asleep after not sleeping the night before. This game of warfare vexed him.

“Tell me now, my lord. Are you going to go through with it?”

“I will, I swear on the Lady.” He turned and faced Gilbert. “On the morrow, if Barton doesn’t open the gate and surrender the castle, I’ll hang his son and then send the body back to the mother by trebuchet.” He clenched his hands into fists. “Tell him what I said, Gilbert. Tell him he *dare* not test my patience any further.”

Gilbert nodded coolly. “I will.”

Before the candle burned halfway out, before the pit-roasted capon on his plate was consumed, before Gervase could even finish his first cup of wine, the reply came back.

Barton would not yield the castle.

And so Gervase could not sleep that night either. With a cloak shrouding his body, the King of Ceredigion walked through the camp, trailed at a

distance by his most trusted knights. Soldiers watched the wooden pickets in case Barton tried a night attack. Gervase hoped that he would. Such an action would bring the fight where it belonged: between him and Lord Barton. But after hours and hours of waiting, the sun began to stir behind the clouds, and the end of night approached. Gervase hadn't even attempted to sleep, and his eyes felt chalky with grit and irritated from the campfire smoke.

Men roused from slumber, the camp beginning to churn with life. Fresh logs were tossed onto fires, and men rubbed their hands over the leaping flames. Gervase found himself staring at the tent where his hostage still slept, but as the shadows were driven away by the sun, his gaze shifted to the gallows, fashioned from one of the trebuchets. A rope hung from it with a noose at the end. A barrel to stand on was positioned beneath it on the turf, both wet with morning dew.

Everything seemed like a dream. No, it was a nightmare. Gervase refused an offering of bread to break his fast and took up his position by the gallows. And then there was young Marshall Barton, smiling and holding the hand of Lord Gilbert, who led him toward the king. When Marshall saw Gervase, his smile brightened, his expression a marked contrast to the malice on his companion's face.

"Do I get to go home to Papa today?" the child asked innocently.

Gervase's throat clenched. He stared at the boy, his brown hair and hazel eyes. "Not today, lad," said the king, trying to wrestle the words out.

"But that's his castle," young Marshall said, pointing.

"Aye, it is. I just wanted to get a better view of it."

"It is a pretty castle," said the boy. "But it's not as pretty as Kingfountain."

It felt like one of the hot coals from the fire lay sizzling in Gervase's chest. It was painful, a slow torture of agony. "Do you miss Kingfountain?"

"Aye. Can we go back soon?"

He saw a soldier wipe away a tear, turning his face from the scene. Gilbert's eyes blazed with fury. His expression showed he thought Gervase was daft for talking to the boy before killing him. He looked determined to march him up to the barrel and do the deed himself. But no, there was a soldier who'd been paid to do the deed already standing by the barrel, holding the noose in his hands, which hid it from the boy's sight. The man looked greensick but determined.

Gervase's stomach clenched. Was he going to be sick?